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AUTHOR	Lewelling, Vickie W.; Peyton, Joy Kreeft
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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on teaching Spanish to native or Hispanic heritage language students in the United States. Heritage language students are students who speak another language (in this case Spanish) as their first language either because they were born in another country or because their families speak another language at home. The entrance of these heritage language students into Spanish foreign language classes places huge demands on teachers, particularly at the secondary and postsecondary levels. As a result, a number of secondary schools, colleges, and universities in states with large Hispanic populations are offering Spanish courses tailored to the needs of Spanish speaking students. These courses offer Spanish as an academic subject to students who have some level of exposure to Spanish from their home environment. The digest discusses the need for these special courses; the characteristics of students who participate in Spanish for native speakers (SNS) courses; the goals of SNS instruction, including language maintenance, expansion of the bilingual range, acquisition of the prestige variety, and transfer of literacy skills; evaluation of the goals of SNS instruction; and resources for SNS professionals. (Contains 14 references.) (VWL)

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Developing Dual Language Proficiency

VICKIE W. LEWELLING & JOY KREEFT PEYTON, ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

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Spanish for Native Speakers
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The increasing number of children who enter U.S. schools from homes where languages other than English are spoken and the overdue recognition that bilingualism is a valuable national resource have helped to generate interest in the field of heritage language instruction, or the teaching of heritage languages as academic subjects. Heritage language students are "students who speak a language other than English as their first language, either because they were born in another country or because their families speak another language at home" (Campbell, 1996). The fastest growing of these heritage language populations is Spanish-speaking immigrants and Americans of Hispanic descent who come from Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Central and South American backgrounds. The entrance of Spanish speaking students into foreign language classes places huge demands on teachers, particularly at the secondary and postsecondary levels. As a result, a growing number of secondary schools, colleges, and universities in states with large Hispanic populations are offering Spanish courses tailored to the needs of Spanish speaking students. These Spanish for native speakers (SNS) courses offer Spanish as an academic subject to students who have some level of exposure to Spanish from their home environment.

The Need for Special Courses

Concern over how to teach Spanish to students from Spanish-speaking backgrounds surfaced as early as the 1930s (Valdés-Fallis & Teschner, 1977). However, it has been only since the late 1970s and early 1980s that the practice of teaching Spanish to native speakers has achieved wide recognition. During this period, increasing numbers of students from Hispanic backgrounds began enrolling in Spanish courses at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Teachers trained to teach Spanish as a foreign language to monolingual English speakers found that they also needed to provide instruction to students who already possessed some level of competency in Spanish. In some cases, the Hispanic students were more fluent in oral Spanish than the teacher. According to Campbell (1996), "the average heritage language student possesses a level of competence in many aspects of his or her ancestral language that far exceeds what typical students in foreign language courses can attain after many years of formal study." At the same time, however, there was consensus among foreign language teachers that these students needed to develop other areas of Spanish language proficiency. Many students had an extensive vocabulary in some contexts, but a restricted one in others. They were unfamiliar with the formal grammar of Spanish and did not read or write it. Many spoke a rural or stigmatized variety of Spanish, different from the Spanish of the classroom. The challenges of teaching Spanish to students who have no experience with the language are clearly different from those involved in helping students develop a broader understanding of the language in which they already have considerable competence (Bills, 1997). Increasingly, teachers of Spanish came to the conclusion that Spanish instruction that had been developed for monolingual English speakers was inappropriate for Spanish speakers.

Student Characteristics

To fully understand the goals and challenges of teaching Spanish to Spanish speakers, it is important to have an idea of the diversity of backgrounds of students who participate in SNS courses and their motivations for studying a language they already know. Enrollees in SNS courses include these groups:

- Third- or fourth-generation U.S.-born Hispanic students considered to be receptive bilinguals. That is, they are dominant in English and understand almost all spoken Spanish, but they have limited speaking skills in Spanish and do not read or write it.
- First- or second-generation bilinguals who possess different ranges of proficiency in English and Spanish. In most cases, these students have received their education in English and have developed few if any literacy skills in Spanish.
- Recent immigrants to the United States who are Spanish dominant. Their level of English proficiency and the amount of formal education they have had in Spanish varies.

In all of these groups, language proficiency may vary from individual to individual and from language to language. Many students are completely fluent in oral Spanish (both speaking and comprehending), others speak and understand Spanish fairly well, while others possess only basic skills in the language. In addition, students in SNS courses come from a number of cultural backgrounds and have had exposure to different varieties of Spanish (Rodríguez-Pino, 1997).

Goals of SNS Instruction

Hispanic students participate in SNS courses for a number of reasons. These may include a desire to reactivate the Spanish they have learned in the past and develop it further, to learn more about their language and cultural heritage, to acquire literacy skills in Spanish, to develop or augment academic language skills in Spanish, to enhance career opportunities, or to fulfill a foreign language requirement. Although the exact goal of different SNS courses may vary, most aim at maintenance and retrieval of functional abilities and further development of existing competencies (Valdés, 1997). SNS courses offer Spanish-speaking students the opportunity to study Spanish formally in an academic setting in the same way that native-English-speaking students study English language arts. The skills that students can acquire range from learning grammar and spelling and developing basic academic vocabulary in Spanish to learning how to critically analyze a text, write poetry, or acquire new information in different academic content areas. Valdés (1997) delineates the instructional goals of SNS instruction as language maintenance, expansion of the bilingual range, acquisition of a prestige variety of Spanish, and the transfer of literacy skills.

Language maintenance. This goal is based on the view that Spanish maintenance across generations can be sustained through the formal study of Spanish. Instruction with this goal focuses on grammar, reading and writing instruction, vocabulary development, exposure to the language and culture of Hispanic communities, and consciousness raising activities about Spanish language and identity.

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Expansion of the bilingual range. Valdés (1997) defines the bilingual range as "the continuum of linguistic abilities and communicative strategies that . . . individuals may access in one or the other of two languages at a specific moment, for a particular purpose, in a particular setting, with particular interlocutors." Many bilingual students have uneven development in their two languages. For example, they may possess the cultural understanding to participate in a particular exchange but be unable to express themselves using the appropriate vocabulary. The goal of expanding the bilingual range moves beyond developing initial expressive and receptive language abilities to cultivating a much broader command of the language.

Acquisition of the prestige variety. Many students who participate in SNS courses speak what may be interpreted as rural or stigmatized varieties of Spanish. One goal of SNS courses is to teach students the prestige or standard variety. Such instruction involves developing metalinguistic awareness about the differences between the standard and other varieties, teaching traditional grammar, and teaching when it is appropriate to use more or less formal Spanish.

Transfer of literacy skills. According to Cummins (1984), "academically mediated language skills can be transferred across languages in a manner that facilitates the acquisition of these skills in the second language." Peale (1991) emphasizes the need for Spanish-speaking students to develop not only their oral language but also their literacy skills in Spanish. In the process, they draw on existing English literacy skills and enhance their English literacy development.

Instructional Strategies

Although a well-articulated instructional sequence for SNS has not yet been achieved, many teachers have been successful in implementing instructional strategies. Two SNS resources published in the last few years (Colombi & Alarcón, 1997; Merino, Trueba, & Samaniego, 1993) include a number of activities that incorporate a high level of interaction among students, teachers, and the community. In addition, Faltis (1990) offers an approach to instruction that draws from Paulo Freire's problem-posing method. Rodríguez-Pino describes the use of ethnography in SNS instruction, in which language is an essential tool. The field work involves interviewing native speakers in the local community who can provide an account of specific topics. Students must ask "descriptive questions that will give them practice in becoming creative listeners in an authentic setting" (1994). The American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP) is publishing a handbook that will be useful to high school and college SNS teachers (in press).

Evaluating the Goals

According to Valdés (1997), the initial goal of SNS instruction was to develop skills in Spanish speakers that would allow them to participate in advanced placement courses in Spanish. She has suggested that the goals need to expand to appeal to students who do not want to be Spanish majors, but who may want to use Spanish in other ways (professionally, for example). Benjamin (1997) discusses how the goals of SNS educators may not jibe with the goals of the students taking SNS courses.

Some SNS educators take issue with the focus on the prestige variety of Spanish and are concerned that some teaching practices may harm students by suggesting that the language they have learned at home is inferior. Francisco Alarcón, director of the SNS program at the University of California, Davis, suggests that "the traditional view is to put down the Spanish spoken in the barrio. People will say it's not pure Spanish." George Blanco of the University of Texas suggests that instructors should work to build on what students already know, rather than trying to replace it. Ana Roca of Florida International University believes that the goal should be to expand students' repertoire without making them feel bad or putting down their parents (described in Collison, 1994, p. 1).

Resources

The field of Spanish for native speakers is currently served by a task force of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, a special interest group of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign languages, an annual conference, a newsletter, an electronic listserv (listproc@cornell.edu SUSCRIBE SNS-L), and a growing body of research and specialized teaching and learning resources. In addition, the Institute of Spanish for Native Speakers at New Mexico State University was established to provide a theoretical and pedagogical framework for teachers who teach Spanish to Spanish speakers. The institute maintains a database of statistical information about students and a collection of pedagogical practices in placement, curriculum, texts, and assessment. For information, write to this address: Institute of Spanish for Native Speakers, Dept. of Languages and Linguistics, New Mexico State University, Box 30001, Dept. 3L, Las Cruces, NM 88003.

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